

GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS ON CONTROL OF HEAD LICE

Disease Investigation and Surveillance Branch California Department of Health Services

Head lice continue to be a problem in homes, day care centers, elementary and preschools in California and elsewhere. Head-to-head contact or, less frequently, an exchange of hats, clothing, combs, brushes, barrettes, helmets, scarves, head phones, and other personal items can transmit lice from an infested child to others. Most schools have a “no-nit” policy, so treatment and use of a nit comb are needed before an infested child can return to school.

INSPECTING A CHILD’S HEAD AND NIT COMBING

Daily removal of lice and their eggs (“nits”) from a child’s hair with a metal nit or flea comb is the most important lice control measure. It is important to inspect the child’s and sibling’s hair thoroughly, especially close to the scalp at the neckline and behind the ears. Complete nit combing of the entire head has to be performed every day until no more lice or nits are found. Several brands of combs are available. The LiceMeister®* metal comb with long teeth is available from the National Pediculosis Association (800-446-4672), is easy to use, and costs about \$15. This and other effective devices may also be purchased at your local pharmacy. Any nits (correct identification of actual nits is critical) that cannot be combed out must be removed either by picking them out with the fingernails or snipping the hair between the scalp and where the eggs are attached.

TREATMENT FOR HEAD LICE

Permethrin or pyrethrin is the active ingredient in most over-the-counter control products. The active ingredient of choice is **permethrin**, which is currently in Nix®* cream rinse formulation. Follow the label directions carefully, but do not go beyond the recommended

time for application without consulting a physician. Do not treat a second time until 7-10 days following the first treatment. Treatment “failures” usually result from the following: 1) incorrect identification (not lice), 2) incomplete combing out or removal of the nits (eggs), 3) not realizing it may take 8-12 hours for the lice to die, 4) lice re-infestation, or 5) not strictly following labeled directions. Resistance could be considered as a possible reason for failure if none of the above apply. If neither permethrin nor pyrethrin products are effective, one alternative is 0.5% malathion (Ovide®*), which requires a prescription. The label of this alcohol-based product states 8-12 hours contact time is needed, then remove nits with a fine-toothed comb.

NON-RECOMMENDED CONTROL MEASURES

There is no convincing scientific evidence to support use of products such as vinegar or advertised compounds to dissolve the glue on the nits (to ease their removal) or kill the nits. Also, there is no documented scientific data to support claims that mayonnaise or olive oil on the hair “suffocate” the nits and lice.

LICE BIOLOGY AND WASHING RECOMMENDATIONS

Lice die within 1-2 days without a blood meal. Nits take 8-10 days to hatch and then it takes about nine or more days for the lice to become adults and lay eggs. Since it is possible for nits or lice to be on items used by the child prior to treatment, clothing and bedding should be washed in hot water. Dry on hot cycle for at least 20 minutes. Items that are not washable should be dry cleaned or put in a sealed plastic bag for two weeks to prevent hatched lice from getting a blood meal. Soak combs, brushes, hair bands, and barrettes in soapy hot water for one hour (or boil for five minutes). Carpets and furniture can be vacuumed daily. THERE IS NO NEED TO APPLY PESTICIDES IN THE HOME!

Please contact your local health department if there are additional questions. These guidelines will be posted on the Department of Health Services web site at <http://www.dhs.cahwnet.gov/ps/dcdc/html/publicat.htm>.

*Use of a product name is for identification purposes only and does not constitute endorsement.